

SIMONE WEIL: PROPHET OUT OF ISRAEL

A Saint of the Absurd

LESLIE A. FIEDLER

"CAST aside all beliefs that serve to fill up emptiness or sweeten what is bitter: the belief in immortality; the belief that good somehow comes of sin, *etiam peccata*; the belief in the providential ordering of events—in short, all the 'consolations' that we ordinarily seek in religion.

"Ineluctable necessity, misery, distress, the

FEW contributions to COMMENTARY have excited so immediate and intense an impact as Simone Weil's essay "Hitler and the Idea of Greatness," printed in our July issue. But this reaction was not untypical of the effect on the contemporary mind of the work of this writer, who died in England in 1943 at the age of thirty-four—a death brought about, at least in part, by self-inflicted starvation: although seriously ill, she refused to eat more than what made up the official ration in occupied France. At the time of her death, she was known in France—to the extent that she was known at all—as an eccentric and brilliant writer on politics and literature. After her death, a small group in the United States who had read translations of several of her essays knew her as a sensitive and eloquent moralist. In the years since, her reputation has steadily grown, and with the posthumous publication of her religious writings she has come to be regarded as one of the most significant religious thinkers to have been produced by France in the past two decades. Here LESLIE A. FIEDLER tries to find some of the keys to the personality and thought of this troubled spirit and ardent mystic who was born into a Jewish family, violently rejected her Jewishness, as she did most of the influences of her early life, lectured from the doorsteps, so to speak, of the Catholic Church, of which she never became a communicant, and wrote, along with much that is merely tortured and self-lacerating, winged words of moral and spiritual insight which men of all faiths find moving and relevant. Mr. Fiedler is associate professor of humanities at the University of Montana. His most recent article in COMMENTARY was "William Faulkner: An American Dickens" (October 1950).

crushing weight of poverty and of work that drains the spirit, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, terror, sickness—all these are God's love!"

When, in 1941, Simone Weil, the author of these extraordinary words, first met Gustave Thibon, the man who was to preserve them for us,* the scene promised to be a comic one, a series of burlesque misunderstandings. M. Thibon was a lay Catholic philosopher of peasant origin who preferred not to be called a theologian, though he had written several remarkable books developing a theory of the sublimation of erotic love to divine charity through the family. Simone Weil, a letter from a common friend had already informed him, was "a young Jewess, a militant left-winger, with a higher degree in philosophy," who wanted to try living close to the soil. Jew, radical, intellectual, back to the land!—she seemed a living cliché, so precise an epitome of all he considered the fashionable sham of a whole generation that M. Thibon feared for his reserves of patience and courtesy.

It would end badly he knew; for although—he naively assures us—he was "untainted, thank God, by any *a priori* anti-Semitism," he had known enough Jews to be convinced that the Jewish temperament was not only alien to his own, but quite unsuited to communal living, though much attracted to such attempts. As for Marxists and *agrégés de philosophie* on the land. . . . The first interview turned out to be quite as ridiculous as he had expected. Simone Weil, nervous, aware of her superficial unattractiveness and compelled to exaggerate it, talked at him endlessly in a maddening monotone, a brutal

*In a collection of aphorisms called *La Pésanteur et la Grâce* ("Down-drag and Grace"), published by Plon in 1948, and edited after the death of Simone Weil by M. Thibon.

assault of talk that made it impossible to settle any practical problems, and left him physically exhausted.

Eventually, M. Thibon lost, in his love for her astonishing purity, his sense of the atmosphere of high comedy created by Simone Weil's inability to be charming on the human level, to be even "human" in any of the lower senses of the word; but the glimpse of her absurdity preserved in his memoir seems a vital clue not provided in other accounts of her life. Her pitiless pursuit of the absolute, her violence in rescuing religious belief from the "pious," are perhaps more important to remember in the end; but in the beginning one must dare to know her as a comic character, anti-heroic, a *shlemazl* and a *nar*.

SIMONE WEIL was born in Paris in 1909 of fairly comfortable people, her father a doctor, and both of her parents the sort of un-Jewish Jews capable of bringing her up without even a vestigial sense of any tradition alien to her Frenchness. At the École Normale Supérieure, she became a disciple of the philosopher Alain, a rationalist, a Platonist, an unconventional moralist—and a radical. Already she had begun to define herself in terms of the stock comic characters of the bourgeoisie: the female intellectual, the Jew who does not admit to being a Jew, the schoolteacher as small-town radical—and though young she was obviously marked even then for the extreme comic role of our civilization: the old maid.

Though she participated in left-wing demonstrations and marched on picket lines, the authorities refused to take her seriously enough to fire her. When a school inspector threatened the revocation of her teaching license, she replied that she had always foreseen such revocation as the crown of her career. But the license was not revoked; another crown awaited her, the crown of an anti-heroic heroism beyond the melodramatic dream of martyrdom of the young radical. (Much later, to be sure, she was refused a post under the Vichy regime, but this was

for nothing she *specifically* was or had done; it was just as another Jew, almost anonymous, that she was rejected; and she did not even know how to admit that she was a Jew.)

Cheated of revocation, she decided to take a leave of absence to go to work in the Renault plant, a banal decision and fundamentally silly, the illusion of the Vassar girl of all lands that in a brief excursion into a factory she can get to know the life whose essential quality is its endlessness. For Simone Weil the outcome was more than usually distressing; not only did she suffer, not as a worker, but as an *agrégée de philosophie* desiring to suffer like a worker—but, ill to begin with, she was attacked by pleurisy and had to quit. In the disgust she learned to feel over her machine, she found a reward, but it was not the easy identification with the workers she had sought.

Regaining some measure of strength, she enlisted with the Loyalists in Spain (vowing all the while never to learn to use the gun she was given) and was hurt, not in combat, but in a trivial accident. Her grandest gestures were fated to end bathetically. Concerned with the possibilities of combining participation and non-violence, pondering the eternal, she forgot the "real" world of missteps and boiling water. Burned and badly cared-for, she was rescued from a field hospital by her parents, whose baffled but stubborn love was always coming between her and the denouement of agony to which she aspired.

During the Second World War, desiring to participate again, she worked out a scheme for being parachuted into occupied France to bring to the wounded members of the Resistance—not medical care, for she lacked even the simplest skills of healing, but her mere presence as a woman! What the military authorities made of this offer we can only guess; we know that they told her that her characteristically Jewish features might compromise her associates—but she had not even been remembering that she had a body, much less one that might bear the typical

marks of a people in whose existence she did not believe.

SHE had no common sense, no sense of humor, no discretion—only an immense, naive seriousness and a contempt for reality. Encouraged by an imaginary gleam of response in the eye of a young peasant girl, she had once embarked on a series of lectures on the Upanishads that left her poor victim utterly bewildered, though too polite to stop her torrent of erudition. She was, in short, a bore—yet another role in the comic repertory. Capable of being only one thing to all men, and despising all strategies or etiquettes of discourse, she risked not only the snicker and the raised eyebrow, but often betrayal or serious political reprisals.

The only case of which I have read when her disregard for the limitations of other people did not produce an absurd anticlimax occurred in Italy, when she revealed to a stranger, in whom she sensed a growing weakness of resolve, the fact that she had fought in Spain. This impulsive decision to temper the shaky soul by temptation did not end in the denouncement which one might have expected; the stranger, though poor, resisted the rewards offered informers and said nothing. Perhaps, after all, this scene, too, remained in character; for to have found a Judas would have thrust her into the role of the betrayed, made of her the hero, and the hero to her seemed the mere *Ersatz* of the prophet or saint, the man who dies publicly for ultimate victory rather than in silence for failure's sake.

Even on the verge of her death in England, a semi-suicide at the age of thirty-four (she had refused, although weak and sick, to eat more than the rations allowed at that time in occupied France), she was baffled in her quest for absolute suffering by special attentions, being removed against her will to the comparative peace of the countryside.

Her eternally frustrated asceticism is a special modern instance: foiled by loving parents and kindly friends, even by impersonal hospital attendants in a world where

the choice of the hairshirt is thought ridiculous or "pathological"—or even a hoax. For most of her life she had, however, one invulnerable advantage over her frustrators, being ceaselessly tormented by headaches (that ill, she called it, "which attacks me at the meeting place of body and soul"), that grew greater or lesser but never left her, and which had grown so severe in her early adolescence that for a long time she was at the very point of suicide. Later there were added the ravages of pleurisy, whose marks she bore until her death.

BUT her illness never seemed to her a sufficiently willed *askesis*; in factory life, in manual labor on the soil (she chose always the most difficult tasks and demanded of herself the same speed and competence as the most experienced workers, insisted on sleeping in the most miserable of quarters), she sought additional mortifications. What "everybody" longed for she ridiculously spurned. She had refused to leave Paris during the war until it had been declared an open city, and when life had become impossible for her parents in France and she had agreed to emigrate for their sake, she even succeeded in hating the United States to which they had fled. Its material comforts she found as humiliating and harmful to her vocation as the "spiritual" comforts of conventional religion.

Instead she plotted an underground return to France, or even emigration to the Soviet Union, whose politics she despised and where she could doubtless not have lived in freedom for a month. Among the Communists in France she had been known as a Trotskyite and had once been threatened with physical violence for delivering an anti-Stalinist report at a trade union convention. But the Russians were just then retreating before the German attack, and she felt obliged to "add a counterweight," to restore a proper balance; for with the defeated, she felt, was whatever could be found, in this world, of justice, "that fugitive from the camps of the victorious." One can barely

imagine her in that improbable context, the pure Comedian, with the gun that would doubtless have blown off her fingers if she had attempted to fire it, flanked by the assured killers of "fascist beasts."

One thinks finally of Don Quixote, of Melville's Pierre, of the tragic buffoons who can never keep our time because they are set by the eternal chronometer—of the Holy Fool, whose wisdom is an unforeseen power of what we call stupidity, the ridiculous raised to the level of the ultimate, divine, absurd.

IT IS necessary to insist upon Simone Weil's religious vocation and her dedication to the absurd, because in this country she is likely to be known, if at all, mainly through the translations of her writings that appeared in Dwight MacDonald's recently demised magazine, *Politics*.^{*} The emphasis of these articles is largely social; and in the context of a periodical with an outlook more purely "political," less mystical, complicated, and ambiguous than her own, they tend, I think, to misrepresent her. Such a piece as "Factory Work," for instance, with its final plea for the humanization of machine work, strikes one as naive and more than a little trite (its conclusions, taken alone, might be echoed enthusiastically by any personnel man trained in the Harvard Business School) until re-read in the light of the concluding aphorisms in *La Pésanteur et la Grâce*. "Why has no worker or peasant mystic written on the use of the disgust that arises from manual labor. . . . Disgust in all its forms is one of those most precious miseries granted to man as a ladder by which he may ascend. . . . No earthly finality separates the workers from God. Only they are in this situation . . . revolution is the opium of the people. . . ." Simone Weil has no sociology, properly speaking, certainly not in the final stages of her thought.

^{*}"Reflections on War," February 1945; "The Iliad: or The Poem of Force," November 1945; "Words and War," March 1946; "Factory Work," December 1946.

Unlike true political or social thinkers, she is never concerned with the *solution* to war or poverty, but always with their *use*. She fears more than anything the proffered hope, utopian or "practical," which diverts the attention of the workers toward the future, toward consolation; the politics of redemption is, like any false religion, an opiate. It is true that Simone Weil's earliest writings, in the organ of the French Teachers Union or *La Révolution Prolétarienne*, a syndicalist journal, were political in the narrower sense she later eschewed; and that she felt obliged at one point to make a full-dress criticism of Marxism; but the culmination of her thought is meta-political. Politics and sociology were for her what rhetoric and women were for Augustine or exegesis of the Torah for Paul—that through which she moved to a final conversion, and consequently that which may have controlled the metaphors, but not the meaning, of her final belief.

Political activity was always a temptation for Simone Weil. Charity urged her to embrace causes that she knew in advance were imperfect, even radically wrong. Her absolute contempt for politics, paradoxically enough, made it possible for her to turn to compromises (her proposed journey to help the Russians, her joining with the Gaullists) that a quasi-absolutist radical would have found impossible. She never deceived herself, however; she knew that those causes which defeat made tolerable would in victory show the face of the Great Beast that lurked behind all political action. The hope of the City of God, as opposed to the fact of the Leviathan, was a hope only, never achievable in this world of necessity and force.

The articles in *Politics* are by no means without value; read in the light of their limitations, they provide a sense of Simone Weil's generosity, her passionate awareness of all human suffering, and the tension between involvement and withdrawal that characterizes her life. But only "The Iliad: or The Poem of Force" reveals her larger

views and final values with any clarity. It is by far her best-known work and, together with two essays thus far untranslated into English ("*L'agonie d'une civilisation*" and "*L'inspiration occitaniennne*," both in *Cahiers du Sud*, August 1942), furnishes the best indication of her total viewpoint outside Gustave Thibon's collection.

THE language of the essay on the *Iliad* is especially remarkable, though Simone Weil affected to despise style (and it has been astonishingly well translated by Mary McCarthy, with the sort of warmth and lucidity seldom found together). In a single, gradual crescendo, it builds from its very first sentence until just before its close to a splendid height of pathos. Transported without a sense of display or melodrama to that peak of feeling, one wonders how one has got there, and cannot wait to return to the Homeric poem to see if the pathos has been legitimately deduced. It has not—not quite, I am afraid. The reading is a *tour de force*, but what we are presented with is an expurgated poem, the *Iliad* as a Christian epic—devoid of that celebration of honor, the boys' vision of *gloire* that nowadays half intrigues, half exasperates us, and lacking the personal story, the individualized tragedy of Achilles and his wrath—an epic in which all that for Simone Weil is foreground was for Homer mere background. And yet—as a partial reading and for its own sake, this version is not without delight and wisdom.

Here is the poem, as Simone Weil reads it. "The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to."

The rest of the essay specifies this generalization, showing it in the context of the Homeric poem, the degradation of the conquered as corpse and slave, and of the con-

queror as the prey of *hybris* and *nemesis*. Against the degradation, the down-drag of force, only love can survive, and the victories of love are few and transitory. A note in the pamphlet edition of this essay prepared by *Politics* suggests that it may intend an "indirect commentary" on the fall of France—but it is more than that, almost a commentary on the fall of man, certainly one on the failure of politics, which is to say, war. "The purest and loveliest of mirrors," Simone Weil calls the *Iliad*—a mirror for politicians.

Politics is, after all, force; in intent the discreet control of force, but in fact the inevitable failure of that control. "A moderate use of force," Simone Weil says ruefully at one point, "which alone would enable man to escape being enmeshed in its machinery, would require superhuman virtue, which is as rare as dignity in weakness." That "superhuman virtue" she will later identify with grace, but at this point in her life she is unwilling to name it. She does not hesitate, however, to identify force, removing it from the sphere of the social to the metaphysical, by translating it first into necessity and then into matter, until the struggle is seen finally in Manichaeian terms as the cosmic conflict of love and matter.

It is scripture that Simone Weil has been seeking at the walls of Troy and not a mere poem, and so she selects and distorts. The impersonal bitterness of Homer in the face of necessity (his gusto is ignored), his equity which refuses to distinguish between Trojan and Greek, she interprets as the spirit which culminates in the New Testament: the cry of despair from the cross and universal charity. The *Iliad* is Simone Weil's Pentateuch, with Plato her Prophets and the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles her Hagiographa. It is from these roots that she sees the Christian Gospels spring, for in her theory the Old Testament of the Hebrews is an evil book, justifying the Leviathan.

But to understand these views fully, we must turn to *La Pésanteur et la Grâce*, remembering that the Greeks of Simone Weil are not the sunny, assured pagans of

the handbooks on the classics, but the inventors of holy despair.

"AGONY," Simone Weil has said, "is the supreme 'dark night' which even the perfect need to attain absolute purity; and to attain that end, it has to be bitter agony." This is a difficult doctrine in all times and places, and it is especially alien and abhorrent in present-day America where anguish is regarded as vaguely un-American, something to be grown out of, or analyzed away, even expunged by censorship; and where certainly we do not look to our churches to preach the uses of affliction. It is consolation, "peace of mind," "peace of soul," that our religions offer on the competitive market place; the means are different, the pew versus the analyst's couch or the newest best-seller, but the product promised is always the same: adjustment, the opposite of agony.

There is scarcely a Christian church that dares remind its faithful that the final words of Jesus were words of despair, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!" But to Simone Weil that cry is more precious than the Beatitudes. "The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in its not seeking a supernatural remedy for suffering, but a supernatural use of suffering," she has said, and we remember that this was once, with perhaps more right, the boast of Judaism, before we swapped Job for Joshua Loth Liebman and the Prophets for "community service." Indeed, Simone Weil insists, his ability to suffer gives to man a superiority over God that would have been a cosmic scandal except for the "incarnation."

Of all the false comforts which the "believer" interposes between himself and the acceptance of agony that alone can purify him, none is more vicious than the hope of "immortality," understood as an assurance that the ego will go on and on in an infinite orgy of self-ness. To Simone Weil the ego is the enemy of Love, the screen between us and God, which we must "de-create" in the contemplation of misery and death, per-

mitting God once more to become the Everything from which he withdrew in the act of creation. This more-than-suicide is the love which we must return for that affliction which is God's love for us, the awareness, at the bottom of all misfortune, of his absence, which is all of him that we can know as long as we are trapped in the ego. Misery frees us from the downward pull, the *pésanteur*, of false comforts and permits Grace to raise us out of ourselves. "Misery forces us to recognize as real, what we would not even have believed possible."

In our time the "atheist" is nearer reality than the kind of "believer" to whom the church is an illusory escape from terror. At least the atheist is unhappy! Non-belief may be a spiritual purification, doing for those outside the church what the exercises of the mystics must do for those within.

"Between two men who have no experience of God, he who denies him is perhaps closer to him."

"A case of contradictories, both of them true. There is a God. There is no God. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is no illusion. I am quite sure that there is no God, in the sense that I am sure that there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say that word. . . ."

The last quotation exemplifies Simone Weil's essential method of speculation, her dialectic which gives to a casual reader the sense of inconsistency: God is everything and he is nothing; "revolution is the opium of the people" but revolutionary activity can discipline one to a true contempt for the social. "Method of investigation—" she has jotted down in a note to herself, "as soon as one has arrived at any position, try to find in what sense the contrary is true."

BUT there is a kind of knowledge certain beyond the possibilities of speculation. Notice that she has said above in the aphorism about who is closer to God, "between two men *who have no experience of him.*" Such experience she believed to be possible

to those who have passed through the "dark night of the soul," either by way of the mystical exercise or through the secular purgation of political activity and agonized non-belief. Certainly, she was convinced that there had come to her such a direct, experiential knowledge of God—perhaps several times, though we have been given a description of only one such encounter.*

Just after her year as a factory worker had ended in total exhaustion and sickness, she was possessed by the sense of having become to the deepest level of her being a "slave," beyond any temptation to hope, and too weary for self-pity. There was left only agony and love. The name of God she neither dared nor knew how to think, but, she has written, "In a moment of intense physical suffering, when I was forcing myself to feel love, but without daring to give a name to that love, I felt, without being in any way prepared for it (for I have never read the mystical writers) a presence more personal, more certain, more real than that of a human being, though inaccessible to the senses and the imagination. . . ."

The immediate occasion of the experience is odd enough to notice. It is a touching case and strangely typical of the contemporary intellectual, compelled to seek underground in literature the uses and satisfactions of ritual, which he is inclined to despise without knowing. Simone Weil was saying to herself a piece of George Herbert. "I thought I was merely reciting a poem," she writes, "and I was saying a prayer":

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew
back,
Guiltie of lust and sinne.
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing.*

*A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.*

*In a letter to Joé Bousquet, printed in *Cahiers du Sud*, No. 984 (1947).

*I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my
shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore
the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my
meat:
So I did sit and eat.*

THIS poem is essential to an understanding of Simone Weil's thought. Its final lines sum up her sense (deeply felt but only tentatively expressed) that there is a love in whose light our deepest intuitions are revealed as partial glimpses of paradoxes more wonderful than any we dare conceive. This is the Grace, the upward attraction that all the time secretly combats the downward tug of an earthly gravity everywhere only too apparent; and knowing it, we know that our misery is our joy, that God is our slave insofar as we have become slaves for his sake. Not all misery and abjectness is *per se* a way to this revelation, but properly used and cherished it can become such a way.

Simone Weil knew that there is a last trap even for those who deny illusory happiness, an *Ersatz* of holy suffering and sacred self-contempt—mere masochism and neurotic self-hatred. For every virtue there is a corresponding disease, and equivalent to the most splendid virtues the grossest sicknesses of the spirit. The end of the lower self-hatred is suicide, the destruction in despair of the possibilities of more ultimate suffering; the end of the higher self-hatred is "de-creation," the burning away in misery of all in us except that which responds to love. For those who can conceive of no "self" beyond that which is the captive of *pésanteur* and the flesh, it may be difficult to see the difference between the self-hatred of Simone Weil (or such chastisers of the flesh as Gautama Buddha or Moshe Leib of Sasov)

and that of a pathological suicide like Otto Weininger. The understanding of such matters depends on what one makes the final ground of explanation: whether from the "psychological" point of view, one regards the striking resemblances between certain neurotic and mystical states as evidence that the latter are frauds; or whether from a religious standpoint, one takes such resemblances as evidence that everywhere the spirit tries to achieve certain relations with the divine that are continually baffled and parodied by a mocking counterforce.

Even from a pragmatic point of view, a self-conscious and principled self-hatred can be understood to have a mithridatic value, harmlessly purging away tendencies which, unrecognized and undeclared, might cause great psychic harm. And certainly self-hatred can be viewed as an *askesis* by way of which we may be delivered of enervating self-pity, and the even more dangerous impulse to project outward onto the Other that which we secretly despise in ourselves. To turn our malice inward away from the guilt-evoked lay figures of Jew, anti-Semite, homosexual, intellectual, or bourgeois, will lead us at least to do less harm to men if not prepare us to see the living God. Such a course is beset by the temptation to despair, and some may founder there; but beyond lies a more ultimate love than we can ever know this side of despair. Here is the ultimate *rite de passage*, the night-journey, the descent into Hell—from which we must not be deterred by the example of those who have not found the strength to emerge, or who, falling in love with the infernal, have chosen to remain.

In Herbert's poem, Simone Weil found her initial assurance of the reality beyond darkness, and the central metaphor of the poem stayed with her always.

"The great sorrow of man, which begins in childhood and lasts until death," she wrote much later, "is that looking and eating are two separate operations. Eternal beatitude is a state in which looking and eating are a single act." And her life itself

works out strange variations of longing and repulsion on the theme: her death through fasting, her refusal to "eat" in the Catholic ritual act of Communion the God she had "seen" in ecstasy.

Simone Weil never became a communicating Catholic, though from that moment forward she desired desperately to be able to enter the Church. Like the great prophets of Israel, she required a vital priestly orthodoxy against which to define her revolt; and it was the Church of Rome that she chose to play the Deuteronomist to her Jeremiah. That she could not turn to Judaism is her tragedy and ours.

OF JUDAISM as a faith she knew nothing; neither she nor her parents nor two of her grandparents had ever seen the inside of a *shul*, and no voice was raised to attract her in an Israel narrowing on one side into mechanical orthodoxy and broadening on the other into secularism, Zionism, and sociology. To have considered herself a Jew would have seemed to her a betrayal of enlightened ethnology; her actual tradition she felt to be "Christian, French, and Greek." Indeed, what vague sense of an obligation to Jewry survived in her was expressed in revulsion, a passionate anti-Semitism that upsets for once her cherished method of honoring contradictories. She will admit no favorable interpretation of the mission of the Jews:

"Israel. All from Abraham on inclusively (except for a few prophets) is filthy and monstrous, as if on purpose. As if to point out with absolute clarity: Note well! here is evil! A people chosen for blindness, chosen to be the executioners of Christ.

"The curse of Israel weighs heavily on Christianity. The atrocities, the Inquisition, the liquidation of heretics and infidels, this was Israel. Capitalism was (and to a certain degree still is) Israel. Totalitarianism, especially among the worst enemies of Israel, is Israel."

"Anti-Israelism" or even, perhaps, "anti-Judaism" would most accurately describe the doctrines of Simone Weil in this regard,

since it was the *beliefs* of the Jews that she especially despised; and yet she herself succumbs to the racism she attributes to them and their mortal enemies: "a *people* chosen etc." In her opposition to Hitler she would never admit the presence of any identification with the Jews; quite the contrary, she accused Hitler always of fighting the battle of Israel, seeking only to revive under another name and for his own benefit the God of Israel, "earthly, cruel, and exclusive." Sometimes, indeed, she insisted that Jehovah and Hitler were Gods in the same sense and on the same plane.

She had recast the whole history of the Jews in terms reminiscent of Houston Chamberlain, so that only her distrust of force seems sometimes to mark off her position from that of the persecuting anti-Semites. "God made purely temporal promises to Moses and Joshua at a time when Egypt was groping toward the eternal salvation of the soul. Having refused the Egyptian revelation, the Hebrews got the God they deserved: a corporeal and collective God who spoke to no one up to the Exile. . . . No wonder that a nation of fugitive slaves, conquerors of a land of milk and honey cultivated by civilizations whose labors they did not share but which they destroyed in a series of massacres, no wonder such a people was able to give scarcely anything good to the world. . . ."

MOST of the writers on Simone Weil have chosen to slight this distressing aspect of her thought; but it is, alas, no peripheral vagary but rather an obsessive theme to which she recurs at the unlikeliest moments, even—as we have seen—in her piece on the *Iliad*. Typical in so many ways of the generation whose allegiances and revolts she turns improbably to the service of God, she must express, too, its deepest shame. Anti-bourgeois, radical, attracted to non-violence yet a participant in the Spanish civil war—she must also be a Jew and an anti-Semite, the anti-Semitic Jew, both sides of our most desperate cleavage in a single body. It is not

inappropriate that the one contemporary writer she mentions with favor is Arthur Koestler.

It is easy enough to say at this point, with some of our defenders of an embattled secularism, that any Christian religious revival necessarily entails the exacerbation of anti-Semitism. But the immediate tradition to which Simone Weil belongs, the tradition of Léon Bloy and Charles Péguy, was before her violently philo-Semitic. Bloy, who scandalized the good Christians of his day by his fury and absolutism (he ran hurrahing through the streets when a church bazaar, with a few score of the conventionally pious, burned to the ground), doubly scandalized them by his defense of the Jews. "Each day in Communion I eat a Jew," he had cried out to his challengers, "and I depend on a bunch of Yids for my eternal salvation!" Involved in his attempt to redeem Christianity is the shame and guilt brought into focus by the Dreyfus affair and the consequent resolve to make it clear beyond doubt that anti-Semitism is a function not of a living Church but only of a dying one. From Bloy the tradition passed to Péguy and reached a climax in the attempt of Jacques Maritain to define a post-Christian mission of the Jews, and in his vision of Israel under persecution coming to resemble more and more the figure of Jesus. "The chastisement of our peace was upon him. . . ."

In the teeth of this tradition, Simone Weil denied to the Jews *any* mission, pre-Christian or post-Christian, except the negative one of embodying a species of evil, the idolatrous worship of what Plato had called the "great beast." As ancient Rome represented the "great beast" in its materialistic, atheist form, Israel represented it in its pseudo-spiritual form, the idolatry of the social as an *Ersatz* of religion. It is not as the "excluded" that she hated the Jews, but as the eminently successful, the inventors of nationalism; she could not include them, as had Bloy and Péguy, with the insulted and injured.

To Péguy and Bloy the Jews had been the Others, immune to the self-contempt these

Christians preached as the beginning of wisdom; to Simone Weil, whatever she publicly asserted, the Jews were herself, her own. And upon them fell that pious hatred—oddly blended of the Gospel saying that “a man’s foes shall be they of his own household” and the socialist teaching that one’s own bourgeoisie was the worst enemy—which in her predecessors had been directed against the “good Christian.” What makes this reaction finally illegitimate in Simone Weil is her terrible refusal to *live* her Jewishness, the quality which to everyone else seemed the very essence of her being. Her hatred of Israel could have been redeemed only by her accepting its pathos as her own.

Against such an acceptance she defended herself by ignorance. Knowing nothing of Jewish mystical thought, she was able to remain undisturbed by the resemblances between her own doctrine and the traditions of Judaism. Though she knows the falsifications of anti-Semitic historians, she displays no real knowledge even of the Old Testament, much less of any of the later religious writers of the Jews. Immensely learned in Greek, and willing to devote much time to learning Sanskrit, she was apparently never even tempted to learn Hebrew.

“There can be no personal contact between man and God,” she wrote. “Except through a mediator, the presence of God to man can only be collective, national. Israel simultaneously chose a national God and refused the mediator; though it may from time to time have tended toward a true monotheism, it always relapsed, and it *had* to relapse, to the tribal God.” That in Israel, too, the problem of an absolutely transcendent God who can yet be apprehended personally was wrestled with in terms of the theory of *sephiroth*, she does not know. It is the dogma of Incarnation which possessed her imagination, and not the theory of Emanation; so that, exposed to the mystical experience, she cries out that Christ has taken her, unaware of even the name of the Shechina. The blame is not entirely hers;

the frantic retreat from mysticism, the embracing of rationalism as a sufficient faith had made Israel inhospitable to the impassioned believer in her country in her time; and she, who might have been a prophet in Israel, sat on the doorstep of an alien church.

Though she entered no church completely and finally, it was the Roman Catholic Church of which she quoted again and again “. . . and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” She is even reputed to have helped convert others to that faith. “You are like the church bell,” a monk, who was one of her dearest friends, once told her, “which calls others into the church, but itself must remain outside.” At one point, just before her departure from France, she was on the verge of becoming a communicant, but at the last minute withdrew because the Roman Church was—too Jewish!

In identifying the God of Love of the Gospels with the Lord of Hosts of the Law, she believed, Catholicism had failed to purify itself of the abomination of Israel. Reviving an ancient heresy of the Gnostics, Simone Weil maintained the absolute discontinuity of the Old Testament and the New. Undisturbed by the mosaic of quotations from the Prophets and Psalms which determine the very pattern of the life of Jesus, and ignoring the source of the injunction, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,” in Leviticus, she insisted that the Gospels were a work of the Greek genius, the culmination not of the Hebrew Scriptures, but of a tradition beginning with Homer and running on through the great tragedians and the philosophy of Plato (Aristotle she distrusted as a kind of Greek Jew). She could never forgive the Church for believing in the Jews as a chosen people, rather than the Greeks or the Hindus—or even the Egyptians!

AND yet, finally, there is a sense in which without violence this anti-Semite can be claimed as a Jewish thinker. She escapes all orthodoxy, to be sure, but it is perhaps as a Jewish heretic rather than a Christian one that she can best be understood. The

slogan whose absence from the mouths of contemporary Christians she decried, the lament, "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*," Simone Weil could have heard on the lips of the Jews, who have never wholly forgotten the uses of despair. The regard for agony and suffering, the belief in the experience of alienation as a supreme proof of God's love, the unwillingness to yield up terror to consolation—these are qualities never entirely absent among the people she contemned.

Man's absolute exile from God, the non-presence and non-intervention of the *deus absconditus*, upon which Simone Weil so uncompromisingly insisted, can be found in the terrible dogmas of Lurianic Cabalism, and in that astonishing metaphor of the Zohar: the figure of *tsimtsum* or the withdrawal of God on himself, which conceives of our being as possible only in the interstices of the universe where God has willed his own non-being.

The refusal to speculate on immortality for fear of giving a lying reassurance to the lowest cravings of the ego, and of losing the absolute savor of death that can alone purify belief—this Simone Weil has in common with the main tradition of the Old Testament. And though she will not yield to the logic of her position and deny the possibility of a savior in time, she feels that Christianity, by moving the Redemption back out of a never attained futurity, has betrayed us to history and the heresy of progress. "The notion of history as a guided continuity is Christian. It seems to me that there are few ideas more utterly false."

The denial of impending redemption protects one from the temptation to demand in the kingdom of this world what is valuable only in the Kingdom of Heaven, as for instance absolute chastity, about which Simone Weil is silent, or absolute non-violence, with which she is greatly concerned. Her limited and reasonable pacifism, though not exclu-

sively Jewish, would be more at home in the tradition of Johanan ben Zakkai than in some of the absolutist Christian traditions, Scriptural or Tolstoyan. And that is why she can answer with more certainty than Gandhi: "Non-violence is not good unless it is efficacious. So with the question of the young man to Gandhi about his sister. The answer should have been: use force, insofar as you are not able to defend her with as much possibility of *success* by non-violent means."

IT is finally the note of zeal, the willingness to scream, to be ridiculous, to offend the standards of decorum and good taste, that makes Simone Weil, like Christianity in general, less Greek than Jew. The stone-cold doctrine of "nothing in excess" denies true fervor and true humility alike. The notion that the lukewarm shall be spewed out of the mouth of the living God comes, after all, from the Hebrews and not from her beloved Greeks, to whom any passionate commitment seemed a betrayal of reason, or a disease.

We have traced a common tradition backward from Simone Weil to Léon Bloy, but the ultimate source of that tradition is the prophet Hosea, the holy fool who married the harlot he had bought in the market place and called his son "Ye-are-not-my-people!" The absurdity, the absolutism, the incandescence of the prophets survive in Simone Weil, and for all her blemishes, their terrible purity.

That she insists on measuring us all, as she measures herself, by that ultimate standard of purity, embarrasses us. Before her assumption that we are worthy of being weighed in such a scale, what are we to say? "It's a lucky thing for all of us," a friend of Simone Weil's once told her, "that you are not God!" And that, perhaps, will do as a final word.